

## **Shay Cullen, Mssc.**

**Founder and President,**

**People's Recovery Empowerment Development Assistance (PREDA) Foundation,  
Inc.**

**September 13, 2005**

**House Committee on International Relations**

### **Testimony: The Life of Street Children in the Philippines and Initiatives to Help Them**

#### **Introduction**

Dear Honorable Members:

Last week before I left the Philippines to come here, I was working with street children. One particular group led by a Filipino-American street boy lives under a bridge abandoned by their parents and society. They are addicted to sniffing industrial glue to ward off hunger and they suffer malnutrition, parasites, and live in fear of police beatings, arrest and detention without trial in dehumanized conditions.

They are typical children of the streets, vagrants and in some other cities, such as Davao in Mindanao, they become victims of shadowy death squads that act with impunity in executing the teenagers leading us to believe they are government sanctioned. The silence and inaction of the authorities despite the mounting death toll is for us a sign of approval. When we protested the killings some years ago we were sued by the city mayor for defamation, but won our case when we proved we were merely defending the human rights of the children and freedom of speech on their behalf. We have been harassed, threatened with death and brought to court to be deported for working to protect the street children and defend their rights to experience childhood and not to be abused.

Street kids are considered pests by some of the business community—as vermin to be exterminated. But they have committed no crime and are the victims of the wrongdoing of uncaring and corrupt politicians and abusive, impoverished parents.

According to UNICEF, an estimated 100 million children worldwide live at least part of their time on the streets (see below for statistics in other countries).

In the Philippines, a government report in 1998 put the figure at 1.2 million street children—about 70,000 of them in Metro Manila alone. Another report estimates that there are approximately 1.5 million children on the streets working as beggars, pickpockets, drug abusers and child prostitutes (ECPAT). Today, the number of children and youth living part of their lives on the streets in the Philippines could reach two million out of a total population of 84 million.

This is the result of human neglect, spiritual paralysis, greed and political irresponsibility that allows and exacerbates the entrenchment of poverty in an unjust social system. The Philippines is a fractured democracy, where feudal practices persist and where the greater national budget is dedicated to servicing foreign debt and paying a bloated bureaucracy, or is wasted on fake or overpriced development projects. There is very little for social programs.

We believe that foreign aid is wasted when poured into the coffers of rich politicians for projects they design to benefit their own family businesses or those of their cronies. Even disaster relief money is squandered and dissipated through corrupt practices.

Homes and shelters for street children are urgently needed. We are trying to establish more. When we requested last month the use of a government building constructed with relief funds given for the victims of the volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo (and soon abandoned), we were told it was better used for officials' offices and vehicles.

Advocacy and public awareness is achieved by workshops and training seminars on the rights of children that PREDA gives to members of the government, the public, students and teachers. The police and prosecutors are specially targeted audiences, as they inflict the most harm on children. The training and awareness-building sessions teach as many as 11,000 people every year.

Street children are always hungry. They leave home hungry and beg on the street where they are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, disease, malnutrition, illiteracy, abuse and trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Most male street children in the Philippines are in conflict with the law at some time and as many as 20,000 see the inside of a prison cell, where they are mixed with pedophiles, drug addicts, murderers and rapists. The street children are exposed to HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis in the prisons.

One of the street children we are helping is a 14-year-old boy I call Francisco. He is a Filipino-American living on the streets—abandoned like many others when the military bases pulled out in 1992 and thousands of children were left stranded. All support ceased and many children fathered by American servicemen became street children.

We filed a class action suit in 1993 on their behalf in the International Court of Complaints here in Washington, DC, to establish these Filipino-American children's rights to assistance. They have been consigned to live on the streets in hovels or slums in unimaginable poverty. Our case did not prosper. The court ruled that the children were the products of unmarried women who provided sexual services to US service personnel in Olongapo, Subic Bay and Angeles City and were therefore engaged in illicit acts of prostitution. Such illegal activity could not be the basis for any legal claim.

The Women's Congressional Caucus, however, recommended that USAID provide financial assistance for throwaway Filipino children on the streets of the Philippines.

They gave, I believe, a sum close to \$650,000 to a US organization, some of which was distributed to various charities, although none went to the PREDA Foundation.

Through the PREDA Foundation we are doing all we can for the street children, the Filipino-American kids and those street kids put in jail, where they suffer the worst punishment of all for a street child—the unjust deprivation of freedom. Thousands of street kids are behind bars for petty misdemeanors and no other crime than being homeless on the streets, taking food without paying to ease their hunger or, when no food is to be had, sniffing cheap industrial glue to ease the pangs.

Solutions can be found in fair trade and by creating jobs for the parents of street kids. This is one of our interventions to break the cycle of poverty passed on from parents to children. Using our own financial resources, we have saved hundreds of street children and Fil-Am kids. Our funds come from PREDA Fair Trading, raised from marketing the products from development projects PREDA has established for the poor. The products are then exported and the parents of street kids or those in dire circumstances are employed when possible.

By providing direct service homes, feeding programs, street education and advocacy to change the system, our work for children has continued unabated and we have been able to save many from the streets, bring them to a residential home, give values formation and formal and non-formal education. Many have good jobs today. This work still goes on. We have a home for former street kids who had been imprisoned, some of whom were never charged and others were not found guilty of any misdemeanor or crime. Some as young as eight and ten years old.

We are asking that foreign aid assistance be focused, directed and used to bring change in protecting the rights of street children, that World Bank loans and ADB loans be more closely monitored for waste and abuse and that child support programs be a component of every aid package.

### **Who are the street children?**

Street children are those children who, when they experience family problems, hunger, neglect and domestic violence, escape from their homes and live part-time on the streets. When they are settled and know street survival techniques, they return at times to their hovels and shacks to visit their families and bring food for their younger brothers and sisters. When they see that the food they bring is not enough, they return to the street and their brothers and sisters sometimes follow them, looking for the source of the food.

Parents at times send them out to beg and scavenge and even prostitute them or sell them in to bonded labor. We cannot forget the children born of teenage street children and aborted in backstreet clinics.

Other street children are child workers, permanently on the streets and engaged in scavenging, child labor, begging, peddling drugs and petty theft. Many end up in jail.

Their rights are frequently abused by the police while on the streets. The girls are sometimes raped in custody and forced to hand over their daily earnings.

Others are accused falsely for crimes committed by street children who have been recruited into gangs controlled and protected by the police. The gangs of street children prey on the younger and weaker children and sometimes make them sex slaves, using drugs, food and fear to control and dominate them. The street children are trained to be drug couriers. Although innocent, the younger and unprotected can suffer untold abuse by the other street youth. When in the jails, they can be mixed with criminals, rapists and pedophiles.

They are runaways from dysfunctional, broken homes with an abusive parent. In the home, usually a hovel and poor environment beside a polluted canal or malarial swamp, they suffer sexual abuse, rape, physical abuse, verbal battering, rejection, malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and dengue.

Most street children are illiterate. Having no incentive, money or support and encouragement to study, they have dropped out of elementary school. They join street gangs for their own protection and use industrial glue as a mind- and mood-altering tranquilizer. They work selling plastic bags, newspapers and flowers or begging for a syndicate. Many are controlled by pimps and sold to sex tourists on street corners or brought to the *casa*, a house of prostitution.

Street children are the poorest of the poor; they are the most vulnerable and weakest and unless they are helped they will be the HIV/AIDS victims of the future. They are forced to be child prostitutes that attract foreign sex tourists. They are susceptible to becoming criminals or even terrorists angry at the adult world that gave them life in the worst misery imaginable. The adult world has done this to the children.

### **Gender balance**

The gender balance of the street children is roughly estimated to be two-thirds boys and one-third girls. No exhaustive research has been done to determine this. Based on the reports of charity workers, this is a fair comment. The groups of children are divided into those who live on the streets permanently and those who live part-time on the streets but go home every three or four days for a few hours or a day and then return to the streets.

They sleep in doorways, in push carts, under plastic sheets, under bridges, in drainage pipes, in derelict buildings, in abandoned cars and buses. Some even make shacks in the trees along the fashionable boulevards. They favor being with the rich dead in cemeteries where the tombs have roofs. They sleep in doorways on the pavements or in the church porch. They live along the sea walls and canals.

### **How young are they?**

The children on the streets a few days a week are the youngest, from seven to twelve years old. The older boys and girls on the street who have been there for one or two

years—that is, permanently on the streets—are aged 13 to 16, although nine- and ten-year-old children are also in this group.

### **Where do street children come from?**

The unstoppable march of global materialism and economic domination further enriches the elite and plunges the poor into even greater poverty, increasing the number of street children and displaced families.

Poverty drives hungry farmers into the arms of the communist rebels and the ranks of the Muslim rebels and other insurgents. They recruit the children as child soldiers and expose them to terrible dangers, violence and killings.

These child soldiers are mentally and emotionally damaged and flee the war for the streets. As the economy worsens, poverty increases, political violence grows and more and more impoverished rural families are driven from their homes in the countryside because of an insurgency and rebellion.

### **From the street to the jail**

Frequently arrested, street children are jailed without proper legal procedures. They are at times treated as non-persons. In a society where money is the measure of human worth, the children have no value. In the subhuman conditions of overcrowded jails and mixed with adults, they are deprived of light, learning, exercise, family and companionship.

They are sodomized and sexually abused by adult prisoners in overcrowded cells without even enough space to lie down together. Half of the prisoners have to stand while the other half sleeps. The only schooling the street children receive inside is how to be a criminal. They suffer systematic violation of their human rights from the day they are accused and are incarcerated without due process of law. When they do get out, they return to the streets and are able to organize street gangs of children to engage in crime. They are psychologically damaged and traumatized and sometimes deranged. They face the dangers of tuberculosis and other diseases while in the prison.

### **What are the initiatives on behalf of street children?**

#### *Community-based*

The children are helped where they are—on the streets. Street contact workers are trained to conduct non-formal education and provide basic needs. Some are successful in getting the children off the streets and into school. This project needs constant follow-up, monitoring and financial support.

Street children themselves are sometimes trained to become street educators themselves. They belong to the peer group and are respected and accepted. They help to break down the lack of trust that street children have of social workers and helpers. Maximum participation of children in the work is a sign of best practice. Non-formal education on the street is an indication of this.

### *Jobs for street children*

The children are helped to find income-earning activities to support themselves on the streets, such as washing cars, guarding parking areas, working as shine boys, selling products on the streets and selling plastic bags around the markets. Sadly, some are made professional beggars, drug couriers, pimps and child prostitutes.

### *Education*

This is an approach that tries to bring responsive children into the school system by providing support and encouragement and regular follow-up and monitoring.

Livelihood opportunities for parents of the street children are sometimes proved by the project. Thus the child becomes valuable to the family, as the child is a source of financial assistance.

Drop-in centers for street children are common in the major cities, but they are vulnerable to the children's love of the freedom they have on the streets. The dropout rate can be high. There is the added difficulty of providing sufficient care that will make a difference in the lives of the children. The centers provide basic needs and shelter but the programs are usually short-lived. When children do stay longer, they are referred to centers that provide care for the long term.

Residential live-in centers are expensive projects and there are not many of them. Unless they are placed in an area remote from the street and efforts are made to locate and bring the parents into the process of helping the children, their success rates will be low, as many children will be enticed to go back to the streets.

### *Forming special action groups of street children*

The goal of these strategies is to help street children organize themselves for self-protection and help. Some have been successful. They feed each other, run for help to organizations like PREDA in emergencies, bring medical help and in the past have even made collections to pay extortion money to police to release their group members. Today they call on PREDA's legal officers to get their group members out of jail.

### *Street contact for children*

This project entails regular contact by dedicated social workers with groups of street children. The workers relate with the children to win their trust, offer legal and personal protection against acts of abuse by the authorities and work to release the children from jails and holding cells or to get charges against them dismissed. The project provides basic needs such as clothes, food, medical help and shelter when needed. Efforts are made to contact parents and enable the child to visit the parents. Part-time work for older children is provided when possible.

Livelihood projects for parents are at times an aspect of street contact, as are meetings, outings and non-formal education. This model is being implemented by the PREDA Foundation, Olongapo City and other agencies. There is no attempt to take the children

off the streets unless they are willing to enroll in school or agree to take non-formal education courses.

### **True Stories: Jordan, Arte, Angel and Hakim**

Jordan, a 16-year-old Afro-American, is the son of an American sailor who was stationed at the US Naval Base in Subic Bay, Philippines, in the 1980s. (The base closed in 1992.) Like thousands of other Filipino-American children, Jordan was abandoned and left on the streets.

He endured racial slurs and discrimination because of his dark skin color and he was ridiculed as the child of a prostitute. His mother died of disease. He was a car washer who had no educational attainment but possessed high intelligence. He was recruited at 14 by the Communist rebels and made a child soldier for six months, after which he was captured by the military during an encounter. He was released after six months but returned to the streets, where he became a gang member and survived by washing cars and becoming a petty thief. He was found by a charity and helped recover through a program of recovery based on affirmation, esteem-building, spiritual formation, character development and skills training. He is now on the way to a better life.

Arte, 10, was a street boy. He ran away from a broken home and lived on the streets selling ice candies. He slept in doorways, begged at traffic lights and never went to school. He was falsely accused of robbery and put in jail while the police reported that they were defeating crime. He had no judicial hearing for four months, was beaten, made to work for the adult criminals and forced to eat off the floor. He was found in the Malabon City Jail in a small jail cell overcrowded with 88 inmates but designed only for ten. It was so crowded that not all could lie down to sleep at the same time. He had skin diseases. His only possession when found with many other street children behind bars was a pair of dirty cotton shorts and a torn t-shirt. He was rescued by a charity and is safe and receiving education.

Angel, 11, grew up in the countryside. Her father was a tenant farmer who was indebted to the land owner and gave 40 percent of his harvest to him, rendering him unable to feed his own family. Angel grew up with six brothers and a sister. At age 11, she was accosted by her 56-year-old uncle, who took her from the fields to the riverbank and raped her.

She ran home, but her parents would not believe her and were angry that she had made such an accusation. They were afraid of starting a family disruption because they owed money to the uncle's family and were ashamed of the publicity that would result if they believed her and filed a complaint.

Angel told her teacher, who reported it to the police. The accused uncle and Angel's parents negotiated a deal with the police. The family of the uncle would pay Angel's parents compensation in the form of debt relief. Such settlements are common occurrences. The child and her rights as a victim were forgotten, the crime was covered up and she was blamed of inventing it. The abuser carried on abusing other children.

Angel was hurt and angry when her uncle scolded her for telling what he had done. She ran away from home and persuaded a bus driver to take her to town. There she joined a gang of street children, both girls and boys, who slept under a bridge and ate castaway food from the market. She did small jobs and survived on the street like this for six months.

Local pimps forced her to become a child prostitute until she was rescued by a charity.

Jordan's half-brother, Hakim, was also abandoned to live on the streets at age 14 when his mother died. He was taken in by a charity and sent to school. At first he was successful, but he was led astray by a gang and resorted to petty crime and a life on the streets. After two years, he was drawn into a drug gang and became a pusher. An envious rival ambushed him one night and stabbed him to death. Hakim was 16.

### **Worldwide Statistics on Children**

At least 100 million children worldwide are believed to live at least part of their time on the streets. These street children are first and foremost working children. (UNICEF, 29 March 1994)

One in five children in the developing world have to work.

5.7 million children work under especially horrific circumstances, such as in the virtual slavery of bonded labor.

In Southeast Asia, between 30% and 35% of sex workers are aged 12 to 17.

At least two-thirds of Egyptian street children resort to drug abuse.

About one million children are exploited each year in the sex industry. This is fueled mainly by local demand, although sex tourism is also a significant problem. The Internet has the potential to promote this and to disseminate child pornography on a global scale.

There are around 200,000 child soldiers forced to fight in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and thousands more elsewhere.

Between 8,000 and 10,000 children are killed or maimed by land mines every year.

Abortion is legal in 54 countries, accounting for 61% of the world's population. Source: Alan Guttmacher Institute

150 million children under five are malnourished.

56% of children under five in Bangladesh are at least moderately underweight.

19% of children have no access to clean drinking water.



Worldwide, more than a million children are in prison. Many are imprisoned for minor offenses such as vagrancy, begging, smoking or non-attendance at school. In the Philippines, an estimated 20,000 children a year see the inside of a prisoner detention cell. (Newsweek)

246 million children around the world are exploited for their labor, most often in dangerous environments such as mines or factories, or in situations where they are exposed to harmful substances.

Approximately 1.2 million children are trafficked each year, many for exploitation by adults either as child prostitutes, child brides, street beggars or workers in cruel and extreme forms of dangerous labor. They migrate and run away from these situations and live as migrants and street dwellers.

These children are often arrested and detained as illegal immigrants once they arrive at their destination.

Worldwide, 13.4 million children under 15 have lost their mother or both parents to AIDS. By 2010, this number will have more than doubled, adding to a crisis for many extended families and communities.

Half of the 57.4 million people displaced by war are children, and millions of these have been separated from their families in this time of crisis.

Globally, one in four children lives in abject poverty. Their families survive on less than \$1 per day.

In the 1990s, more than two million children died as a result of armed conflict.

20 million children have had to flee their homes due to conflict and the violation of human rights.

Around 30,000 children under five die each day, mostly from preventable causes. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, 3,000 die from malaria every day. (Source: UNICEF)